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ABSTRACT

This study followed each of three students in several different social contexts within an elementary classroom, analyzing their discourse from different theoretical perspectives. The social construction and reconstruction of students across different classrooms, tasks, and social contexts was examined, including the influence of constructs pertaining to social class, race, ethnicity, and culture. Although teachers had described the students as having such fixed characteristics as "shyness," results of taped and observed interactions indicated that students' subjectivities and personality traits were more dynamic, and that their interactional styles varied as they encountered different tasks and changing group compositions. Implications for practice are discussed, including the importance of balancing large and small group activities and the value of encouraging multiple interpretations of literary materials. (Contains 45 references.) (PB)

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Challenging the View of Students as Static Individuals: Cases of Three Students in Different Group Contexts

by

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Challenging the View of Students as Static Individuals:

Cases of Three Students in Different Group Contexts

In the process of conducting a year-long, ethnographic examination of teacher and student interactions in a multi-age, literature-based classroom, I was struck by the ways in which several students I was following as case studies responded quite differently in some classroom activities than in others. Students' social class, racial, ethnic and gender identities influenced power relations within the particular social setting as did the teachers' and students' constructions of the classroom tasks. While no single theoretical perspective accounted for students' inconsistent interactions, I found that when talking with teachers and parents about the students we all tended to lapse into a kind of "trait theory" to explain students' interactions in small groups. For example, comments such as "she is so shy" were intended to account for why Rosa did not speak up in a certain small group setting. Thus, I decided to investigate several--sometimes conflicting, sometimes overlapping--frames to explain students' interactions in groups.

I focus on three students in several different social contexts within an elementary classroom and analyze their discourse from different theoretical perspectives. In particular, I challenge the common-sense view of students as unified, static individuals and use data to support both social constructivist and post structuralist theories. I examine the questions of: (a) How are students socially constructed within classroom settings? (b) How do constructs of social class, race, ethnicity, culture, and gender influence student interaction? and (c) In what ways might the task influence student interaction? From these data, I argue that students "reconstructed their subjectivities" (Dressman, in press) as they encountered different tasks and changing group compositions and that viewing students as socially-constructed subjectivities has the potential to transform current literacy practices.

Theoretical Frames

The concept of the individual as a set of genetically determined or learned "traits" has persisted into twentieth century psychology. For instance, Marilyn Heins, M. D., citing Jerome Kagan in her column about how to handle "shy children," stated, "we used to think that shyness was a learned trait. We now know that extreme shyness has a genetic component. . . And these traits persist. The inhibited infant remains shy" (July 9, 1995, p. G-8). This common-sense view of the individual as an asocial, fixed identity is a form of determinism that is a vestige of Cartesian philosophy (Belsey, 1980). Trait theory has found its way into found school curriculum and teacher training workshops through an emphasis upon "learning styles" (Elmore, Peterson, & McCarthey, 1996) and the wide distribution of "learning styles inventories" (e.g., Gregoric; McCarthy, 1980; Meyer-Briggs). Implicit in these inventories is the idea that individuals have a set of stable personality traits that are asocial in nature.

Challenges to the conceptualization of the individual as a stable, unitary phenomenon have come from a number of perspectives. Social constructivists such as Vygotsky (1978) suggest that the individual is formed through social interactions; children appropriate cultural norms through internalizing social relations. Because learning occurs as the result of the individual's interactions with others, the role of the knowledgeable member of the culture is vital. An adult or more capable peer assists the child through dialogue (Wertsch & Stone, 1985).

Post structuralists extend the critique of Cartesian dualism (e.g., individual vs. social) by replacing the notion of the individual with the concept of the subject. Whereas individuality is the product of nature or biology, "subjectivity is the product of social relations" (Fiske, 1987, p. 49). "The term 'subject' encourages us to think of ourselves and our realities as constructions: the products of signifying or meaning-making activities which are both culturally specific and generally unconscious" (Orner, 1992, p. 79). Because subjectivity is a social construction, it is "a matrix of subject-positions, which may be

inconsistent or even in contradiction with one another" (Belsey, 1980). Race, social class, and gender are aspects of the multiplicity of social positions that are partial, local, and contingent upon the situation (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991). Walkerdine (1990) suggested that "the contradictions, the struggle for power, the shifting relations of power, all testify to the necessity for an understanding of subjectivit*ies*, not a unique subjectivity" (p. 14).

Social constructivist and post structuralist perspectives share a critique of the Cartesian dualism between the individual and the social and emphasize the role of language.[1] However, they have different emphases: Vygotskian theory focuses on individual learning and development within a social context, while post structuralists theories examine relationships between power and knowledge (e.g., Foucault, 1984). Differences in views also exist about the nature of the individual and the role of language. Vygotskian perspectives suggest that interior processes are modeled on exterior ones, but maintain the distinction between inside and outside (Ingleby, 1986), whereas post structuralists blur those distinctions. Additionally, Vygotsky expresses ambivalence toward the role of language; on the one hand, language represents reality and, on the other hand, language is used to express personal ideas (Wertsch, 1996). Post structuralists, in contrast, maintain that language is central because "It is through language that people constitute themselves as subjects" (Belsey, 1980, p. 59). The essential role of language, whether from a Vygotskian framework or a post structuralist one, is apparent in the social setting of the classroom.

Language in the Classroom

Researchers of classroom discourse (e.g., Bloome, 1994; Cazden, 1988; Mehan, 1979) have found that the traditional IRE pattern in which teachers initiate, students respond,

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[1] Social constructivist and poststructuralist views are much more complex than presented here. Within each of these frames, there are many differences among the theories depending on the author. For example, Rom Harre is a social constructivist whose ideas diverge significantly from Vygotsky's. Likewise, Foucault's views are quite different from those of Lyotard or many of the feminist post structuralists. The frameworks are presented with broad sweeping generalizations for the purposes of enlarging our views about specific students within particular contexts.

and teachers evaluate has limited the amount of student interaction. Often the IRE pattern is a mismatch with students from diverse cultural groups who use differing patterns at home (Au, 1993; Heath, 1983). These researchers have recommended altering traditional discourse patterns (Cazden, 1988; Jordan, 1985). Teacher-led discussions (Nystrand, 1993) and peer work groups seem to provide students with opportunities to construct knowledge (Meloth, 1991). Barnes and Todd (1977) found that students were able to negotiate new understandings of text when arranged in small groups. Students in peer-led groups were more substantively engaged than in teacher-led groups and were more likely to craft new interpretations based on others' ideas (Almasi, 1995).

Advocates of literature-based instruction emphasize the power of small groups to encourage reflection and dialogue about texts (Harste & Short, 1991) and to engage in literate thinking (Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992). Through small-group discussion, students are able to synthesize information, address important themes, and use a range of ways to respond (McMahon & Raphael, 1994). Diverse learners can gain insights about text from each other as peers take on the roles of more knowledgeable others (Goatley, Brock, & Raphael, 1995).

Yet, many researchers have underestimated the political nature of these peer arrangements, missing opportunities to point out how social relations from the larger society may be reproduced in small groups (Lensmire, 1994). Variations in students' learning has been attributed to students' abilities to generate relevant knowledge to the task (Alton-Lee, Nuthall, & Patrick, 1993), but not emphasized the ways in which the constructs of gender, race, culture and social class influence interactions. Evans (1993) found that more popular students assumed leadership roles within small groups. Floriani (1994) found that pairs of students with shared local histories were more likely to work on the content of a text than those without shared histories who spent more time negotiating roles and relationships. However, little research has examined students in different

literacy contexts while taking into consideration the ways in which the nature of the task and gender, social class, and race influence peer interactions.

Classroom Context/Methods

I examined the literacy events within a team-taught, third-fourth grade in a southwestern city for an entire school year. The classroom reflected the cultural diversity within the school with 57% Hispanic, 39% European-American, and 4% African American students; 62% of the students were on free or reduced lunch. I focused on four students as case studies (three are included here). Audio taped, classroom observations of large and small group interactions were the primary sources of data for this study. I also conducted several interviews throughout the year with the teachers, four formal interviews outside the classroom setting with each student, and one interview with a parent of each student about their perceptions of literacy activities.

In conjunction with other teachers from across the hall, the two European-American teachers had developed a unit on Ancient Egypt which lasted about three months to teach to their 49 students. Students were involved in activities such as learning about the process of mummification, making papyrus, doing research on queens and pharaohs, producing a television news show, and preparing questions for a quiz show modeled on *Jeopardy*. Central to the unit were the reading and response activities related to the trade book *The Egypt Game* and picture books about life in ancient Egypt. During "novel time" the teachers read aloud from a book and students responded either in written form (writing down open-ended responses in "quick writes" or journals) or in oral form (small group discussions). The activities in which I observed students were related to "novel time." Specifically I focus on students in the following contexts: (a) reading aloud their responses to the whole class; (b) reaching consensus in a small group about a teacher-constructed question related to a picture book; (c) sharing their journal response with a small group; (d) creating questions to be used for their quiz show, *Jeopardy*, in a small group; and (e) generating lists for the "afterlife".

After examination of my field notes from "The Egypt Unit," I selected key events of large and small group interactions featuring the three focal students for verbatim transcription and further analysis. I brought audio tapes and transcripts of the key events to the home of one of the teachers. Together, we listened repeatedly to the tapes, identifying students' voices, clarifying speakers, and editing the transcripts. I asked the teacher to provide her interpretations of the group interactions. Interweaving the interview and observational data, I have created narratives of students' interactions from different perspectives.

Interpretations of Students in Group Settings

Vignettes from each student's participation in several literacy related activities are presented below. Within each of those vignettes, I provide interpretations from different theoretical perspectives: trait theory, social constructivism, and post structuralism.

The Problematic of Rosa

An Hispanic fourth-grader, Rosa lived in an apartment with her mother, father, and a younger brother and sister for whom she had some responsibility for care. Her parents both worked for the IRS, her father full-time during the day and her mother working the evening shift. This arrangement allowed the parents to share the responsibility of child care of the younger children. Rosa's parents had high school educations and moved from a small, rural town on the United States/Mexican border when they married. Rosa reported that she spoke English at home; her mother said that Spanish was spoken between the two parents at home and they spoke to the children frequently in English and occasionally in Spanish.

Rosa's mother described her daughter as "very shy" and went on to explain, "I was very shy. I guess that's why my kids are shy now." Another reason she had to account for her children's shyness was, "my kids have never been in day care so they're real close to me; they're real attached to me. I've always been home so it's kind of difficult for them to go to school. Rosa had the same problem." Her mother

saw Rosa as "very helpful" and "she is a real good kid. Of all three, she has the more moderate personality. My other ones are head strong and she's not." These characterizations of shyness and helpfulness seemed to be shared by her classroom teachers.

Describing her as "real shy. . . solemn and kind of sad" her teachers found that she did not volunteer to read her quick writes aloud to the whole class (journal responses written within a five minute period about a chapter) and did not speak unless she was called upon:

> She's one of those kids who is really quiet; she doesn't demand a lot of attention from you because she's not a behavior problem and she's not one of those outgoing extroverts that are constantly raising their hands.

In my observations of the course of the school year, Rosa did not ever volunteer to read her work aloud. This seemed to support the view of Rosa as having a "shy" personality. However, during small group interactions, Rosa's response patterns varied.

Small group consensus task. The teachers had read aloud a picture book called *Zekmet, the Stone Carver* . The task was for students to discuss and achieve consensus about the question: Why do you think Zekmet treated Hotep poorly? Rosa's peers were: Edward, a European-American boy; Sharon, an Hispanic girl; and Jose, an Hispanic boy. Three students had provided their opinions of why Zekmet treated Hotep poorly just prior to this exchange:

Jose: *I think he is greedy.*

Edward: *OK, everybody said something except Rosa. He said he thinks Hotep is greedy. (inaudible) So which one do we want to go with?*

Sharon: *Well, I didn't hear.*

Edward: *Well, mine is approximately the same thing you did. Cause he treated him bad. (Teacher asks who needs more time for discussion). So who thinks that me and Sharon's is good?*

Sharon: *Remember, everybody has to have a turn.*

Edward: *Everybody has gotten a turn.*

José: *Rosa hasn't.*

Edward: *Yes, she has.*

José: *She has? I didn't hear.*

Sharon: *Neither did I.*

Edward: *You have?*

Rosa: *I don't know.*

Edward: *I guess sh hasn't then. Come on. You had all the time in the world to think.*

Rosa: *I'm thinking. I think what José does.*

From the position of seeing Rosa from a "trait perspective" as a shy, acquiescent girl the following interpretation seems plausible: Previously, Rosa has not spoken up and, aware of the classroom rule that everyone is supposed to be involved in the discussion and give their opinions, José and Sharon point out that she has not yet offered her perspective. Under pressure from Edward, who believes she has had "all the time in the world to think," she tries to get a space in the conversation, but then agrees with a view that has already been given. The teacher seems to support this view when she offers the interpretation of, "Rosa did not say much at all. I think that is Rosa's nature--she is pretty quiet." When I asked the teacher how she would account for the group interactions, she noted Edward's domination, and attributed the dynamics of the interaction to the individual personalities of group members:

Edward is a very vocal person; no matter what we are doing he is vocal. He is used to being heard. That is not only in the classroom but outside of the classroom, playing on the playground. He is used to others looking at him as a leader. He is used to taking charge. He has a strong personality, whereas Rosa's personality, she is less likely to dominate a conversation or come up with an idea because she is more willing to sit back and listen to what other people have to say and be happy with someone else's idea rather than express her own. I don't think she is as self-confident as Edward is.

The picture changes, however, when we examine the situation from the perspective of Rosa as a working-class, Hispanic girl. From this point of view, the small group interaction is reflecting broader social relations; just as white, middle-class males control the discourse at the societal level, a white, middle-class male (Edward) controls the discourse in this small group (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Rather than seeing Rosa as "shy," she is viewed as "silenced" by the white male in the group who dominated the conversation (Lewis & Simon, 1986). Rosa's Hispanic peers, José and Sharon, tried to facilitate her entry into the conversation as an act of resistance (Giroux, 1988). At first, she declined to respond, but then she quickly agreed with Jose to gain solidarity with her Hispanic peers against the dominating white male. In this vignette social class, gender, and cultural identities all seem to influence the interaction. This more post structuralist perspective gains credibility as we see Rosa in the next vignette with a different set of peers.

The "jeopardy game." The task was for different groups of students to generate questions for the class Jeopardy game related to what they had studied about Ancient Egypt. Students were assigned to write questions in a jeopardy format (categories were assigned to small groups by the teachers (e.g., "everyday life," "gods and goddesses," "pyramids," the book *The Egypt Game*) and the respondents were to

give their answers in question format, (e.g., the country in which the Nile River is located: What is Egypt?).

The group consisting of Rosa; Dana, a middle-class, Hispanic girl; Rocio, an Hispanic girl; and Matthew, a working-class, Hispanic boy who had difficulties reading and writing was assigned to generate questions about the book, *The Egypt Game*. At the beginning of this segment Matthew had his jacket over his head:

Dana: *Where, where was the Egypt Game located?*

Rocio: *Located in the casa (??)*

Dana: *No, no, no, no.*

Rocio: *It was Egypt. It was located in Egypt.*

Rosa: *It can't be, like the professor's backyard.*

Rocio: *Yeah, the professor's backyard.*

Dana: *That is not a hard one.*

Rosa: *That is a hard one.*

Rocio: *Who was the king of England?*

Students laugh.

Rosa: *That has nothing to do with it.*

Dana: *Yeah.*

In this group interaction, Rosa was much more verbal than in the previous interaction as she commented on others' responses and even actively disagreed with her peers. The three girls disagreed, joked with one another, and kept each other on task. When asked about Rosa's increased participation, the teacher responded:

> Rosa is participating more because she feels more comfortable. I think it has to do with the fact that Rocio and Dana speak Spanish and Rosa feels more comfortable with that. She is not as intimidated by the girls as she is by Edward. I think probably Dana and Rocio are more accepting of her ideas and more willing to listen, whereas

Edward was very dominating. . . Had she been in a group with Rachel or Melissa, or even a boy, not Henry (an African-American boy) who is like Edward, very strong personality.

While the teacher retained elements of a "trait" or personality perspective, she also saw the influence of language and group composition as contributing factors in students' participation. She identified particular students' personalities as key factors in the small group interaction. For her the reference to "language" may have been a proxy for culture, but a safer way to account for student differences than referring to ethnicity. From a more post structuralist perspective, the group composition is central. In the second group, no white males were present and Rosa did not have to compete for the floor. Rosa interacted with the two other Hispanic girls, generating questions, disagreeing at times, and ignoring the male who was well-liked, but had difficulties reading and writing.

A social constructivist point of view would paint a different picture: The differences in context and task are highlighted--Rosa participated in the task that was more open-ended such as generating questions of student choice rather than having to reach consensus. Rosa's interview response seemed to provide credence for both the task and group composition affecting her. She said that the group discussions that required consensus were difficult, "It takes too long to agree on one answer" and preferred other settings where, "Nobody would be arguing and telling that's the wrong answer or 'no, we can't write that.'"

Small group read alouds. Another task related to response after reading picture books was for students to take turns reading aloud their "quick writes" and then discuss any topics related to the book. The group responding to the book about artifacts from Ancient Egypt consisted of the same group as above: Rosa, Rocio, Dana, and Matthew. In this group, Dana took the leadership by calling on people to read. When it was Matthew's turn and he seemed to struggle with reading the teacher's handwritten dictation of his response, Rosa went over to him and prompted him. She inserted words when he paused,

but did not take over the reading. In this setting Rosa assumed the role of a teacher, prompting and assisting when necessary but not dominating. From a social constructivist perspective she was providing scaffolding for Matthew by prompting him, but not taking over (see Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1978). From a "trait" perspective Rosa seems to exhibit the quality of helpfulness as described by her mother and teachers.

Each of the theoretical perspectives is limited in its account of Rosa's actions. While there is evidence that Rosa seemed alternately "shy" or "helpful," there seems to be more evidence that she is a complex and dynamic subject, responding differently depending on the context. The social constructivist position focuses on the changing task and Rosa's changing roles, yet does not consider Rosa's relative position as a gendered, classed, and racial subject.

The Multi-dimensionality of Matthew

Matthew was an Hispanic student from a working-class family who lived with his mother, his mother's ten-year old sister, and his mother's boyfriend, whom Matthew called 'her fiancé' in a small rental home. His mother worked as an assistant direct care worker in a psychiatric facility and her boyfriend worked as an operations manager for a moving company. She received her GED after giving birth to Matthew at a young age and worked a second job several nights a week to supplement her income.

His mother described Matthew as "a real curious kid which is cool and he is real open to new things." One of his teachers described him as, "hyper, but he's a good kid." He participated in some classroom activities, but did not participate in others because he was at Resource. In the Resource room he got individual help in reading and writing; he had particular difficulties in decoding text and in writing words and sentences. His classroom teachers provided examples of where Matthew had solved logic problems easily and believed he had "good comprehension and great recall. . . and great oral vocabulary." His teacher reported that the Resource teacher thought Matthew was "one of the brightest, yet most disabled students he has."

Sometimes Matthew was present for "novel time" where he would dictate his response to one of the teachers who would write it down for him. When present for sharing during novel time, he often volunteered to read his work aloud to the class. His work was accepted by the other students and he seemed pleased with their reactions. However, the small group settings were not always safe places for Matthew. In fact, during the jeopardy game task in which Rosa became an active participant, Matthew's contributions were continually ignored.

The jeopardy game. This vignette is taken from the same interaction previously described with Rosa as the focal point. In this sequence which takes place just after Rosa has contributed ideas, Matthew seems systematically if not intentionally ignored:

Matthew: *Who was the first one, who was the first one to make up the Egypt game? (tries to talk over others)*

Dana: *I know a better one. I know a better one. Rocio, I know a better one.*

Rocio: *What?*

Dana: *Who was the first person to introduce in the chapter?*

Rosa: *Huh?*

Rocio: *Who was the first one to what you call it, begin the Egypt Game? It was April.*

Matthew: *I said that.*

Rocio: *No, you didn't. I said that before you did.*

Rosa: *You said how did the Egypt Game begin.*

Matthew: *Yeah I meant like the game game. (a character in the book invents a game)*

Rosa: *I can't do this.*

Rocio: *Just write the question. Write the question.*

Rosa: *What was the question?*

Dana: *Who was the first person, who was the first person to begin the Egypt Game.*

Dana: *Introduce.*

At this point, Matthew seemed to become quite discouraged because he covered his head with his shirt. A few minutes later, he placed his folder over his head. When the teacher noticed this, she came over and asked if Matthew were participating, "Are you going to let Matthew ask a question?" Matthew spoke up to defend his participation saying, "I've been" to which the teacher responded, "You have a lot of information in your folder." The conversation continued and, when Rocio forgot the octopus' name, Matthew provided it (Security), but was never given credit:

Rocio: *Who found, what was that octopus name?*

Rosa: *Who found*

Matthew: *Who found Security (the octopus)?*

Dana: *Who found Security?*

Rocio: *You give that answer to what's his name.*

Dana: *Marshall (a character in the story).*

Rocio: *No, he didn't. Toth (a god) did because he gave him a letter saying where it was.*

Dana: *The professor hid it.*

Rocio: *They wrote a letter to Toth whatever his name was,*

Matthew: *Wrote a letter to Toth*

Rocio: *Then they went in there and looked for it.*

Dana: *Marshall found Security.*

Rosa: *I am trying to write the question.*

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Rocio: *Toth did but he is the one who wrote the question. Yeah but you already wrote that.*

Rosa: *Yeah but the professor wrote it, don't you remember?*

Rocio: *OK, OK, I get the point.*

Matthew seemed to rebel and attempt to undermine the group by speaking directly into the microphone, making noises, and saying, "Toth did not do it" repeatedly. The three girls continued the discussion about the name of the professor's wife with Matthew attempting to contribute, but being cut off. He made one last attempt by suggesting:

Matthew: *I know, who was the person to solve the mystery? (in an excited voice)*

Rosa: *What mystery?*

Matthew: *The mystery of who*

Rocio: *Really, really, really hard question. Somebody think of a hard, hard question.*

Rosa: *Who gots the brains here? You do (pointing to Dana).*

The other students cut Matthew off and then pursued a different train of thought for a few minutes. However, Matthew persisted and initiated one last idea:

Matthew: *You know what, you said you were looking at the King of England, it was on there.*

Rosa: *Oh, oh, oh. Where was Security found?*

Dana: *Where was what?*

Rosa: *Where was Security found?*

Matthew: *I said that.*

Dana: *Where was Security found?*

Rocio: *In the tomb of Isis.*

Dana: *Where?*

Rocio: *In the tomb of (slowly) the evil one.*

(inaudible)

Dana: *Yeah, that's a good one. That's a good one.*

Rocio: *I thought of it.*

Matthew: *You know when she said who was the King of England. . .*

The girls ignored Matthew's contributions and began to discuss other questions and ideas. Matthew seemed to give up on contributing and began to blow on his paper, finally getting Rocio's attention. She stared at him, apparently in an effort to get him to stop. Matthew did not attempt to participate any longer and the session ended a few minutes later. After hearing the tape, the teacher had the following response:

> I like the way the students were interacting except for the fact they seemed to leave Matthew out quite a bit. Those three were pretty close knit but they were on task all the time. They were a little silly now and then but that is fine, that does not bother me. I think the reason why they don't include Matthew because a lot of times he is doing things and looking like he is not paying attention, but whenever you read through this you notice he is listening and he is picking up what they are saying. Every once in a while when he thinks it is important enough he will put something in. A lot of time Matthew's body language does not give the impression he is listening.

A trait perspective might suggest that Matthew was a disabled reader and writer who held low status in the group and thus his ideas were disregarded. Perhaps because he was perceived as a poor reader and writer by his peer group, they generalized to seeing him as lacking any academic skills related to the task (Cohen, Kepner, & Swanson, 1995). The teacher did not accept this view of Matthew, however, believing that he was quite capable. She believed his body language did

not communicate participation and interest, and thus he was misinterpreted by his peers.

From a social constructivist point of view, the task and other circumstances surrounding the task are crucial here in understanding the group interactions. Matthew was at a disadvantage because he had not been present for all of the novel time sessions due to being at Resource. Further, his role was somewhat restricted; because he was not able to write well, he could not take on the role of the recorder. Much of the conversation activity and conversation took place around the person who was writing down students' ideas. Sitting on the other side of the table from the recorders, Matthew had restricted access to what questions were actually recorded.

A feminist post structuralist view allows us to see something quite different. The three Hispanic girls gained solidarity with one another and continually ignored Matthew's contributions or did not give him credit even when they appeared to use his ideas. Matthew's reaction was alternately to try to participate, resist, and then to give up. When asked, he could barely remember the Jeopardy Game, but said he did not like one of the small groups he was in because of a girl, "who's mean, she bosses people around." In contrast to the small groups, Matthew enjoyed the large group settings where his ideas seemed appreciated by the teacher and certain students.

Lists for the afterlife. Matthew seemed to be very successful in the large group settings or in settings where the teacher was present to assist with the reading and writing tasks. During one session in which students were to put themselves in the place of the Egyptians and generate lists of what to take with them in the "afterlife," Matthew gained recognition from his peers. As the teachers were demonstrating to the entire class on the overhead how to set up their lists, Matthew entertained the peers at his table by suggesting he would bring "video games" and "vampire teeth" to which his peers laughed. Upon hearing the laughter, one of the teachers called on him to tell the class what he would take.

Matthew responded "pizza" and "food;" members of the class laughed (they seemed to appreciate the way he was saying it as much as the items themselves); and the teacher asked why. Matthew responded, "Because it tastes good" which made students laugh again. A few minutes later students were to generate individual lists and the teacher came over to assist Matthew with his writing. His responses of "sneakers" and "my dog" continued to amuse both the teacher and the students who were privy to his list.

A trait perspective might characterize this vignette as demonstrative of Matthew's personality which contained a humorous side, whereas a social constructivist perspective might focus on the open-ended (and, for the most part, oral) task as facilitating humorous responses. Matthew is clearly in a position of power from a post structuralist view. His responses are accepted by his peers and legitimated by his teacher who, under different circumstances, might have reprimanded him for speaking out of turn during the initial whole group lesson.

Certain settings seemed to facilitate Matthew's participation more than others. For example, while his ideas were valued in the large group settings by the teachers and peers, particular small groups such as the "jeopardy game" appeared to limit his contributions. When he was the only male in a small group that relied heavily on reconstructing information presented during "novel time" Matthew had a difficult time. Both the nature of the task and issues of gender surfaced in analyzing his participation. Again, a trait theory does little to shed light on the differences in the nature of his participation, while social constructivist and post structuralist theories provide lenses through which to see the ways in which Matthew and the context were mutually shaped by one another. This mutual shaping occurs in the case of Andy as well.

Understanding Andy

Andy, a European-American child, lived with his mother who did accounting work in the zoology department at a nearby university. She held a BA in secondary education and biology. His father had completed his Ph.D. in economics recently and had to take a

job in another state, but the family expected to be reunited when his parents could find jobs in the same place. Although they lived in a small, moderately-furnished apartment near the school, they hoped to be able to buy a house in the near future. Andy was very successful in the school setting. He had been with one of his current teachers in the multi-age setting for three years. She described him as coming:

> in at a second level (grade) with more vocabulary than I'll probably have in my entire life. . . Today we were talking about idioms and figures of speech and he knew all about the literal meanings and the figurative meanings and of course it went over everyone else's head. He's like a little sponge, he soaks everything up.

Large group setting. Andy frequently volunteered to read his responses to the entire class. The teachers often laughed aloud at his responses, pointed out well-chosen words, or asked questions. Before reading the story the teachers frequently called on him to define particularly difficult vocabulary words. Andy seemed to enjoy providing definitions and examples. During these sessions his responses were highly valued by the teachers and were accepted by his peers. However, small group interactions held more challenge for him.

Small group read-alouds. Students were arranged in small groups to read aloud their responses to the book *Into the Mummy's Tomb*, a nonfiction account of Carter's discovery of the tomb of King Tut. They were not to reach consensus on any interpretation, but rather to share their open-ended responses. Andy was in a group with Juan, a working-class Hispanic boy; Cassie, a European-American girl; Melissa, a European-American girl; and Marta, an Hispanic, working-class girl. Much of the initial interaction revolved around deciding who would read first. Melissa and Cassie chided Juan into listening and paying attention, then the following interaction occurred:

Juan: I am going last because I don't know nothing.

Melissa: Ms. (teacher), he don't want to be quiet.

Cassie: He keeps talking.

The students appeal to the teachers twice before they decide on who will begin reading. When the teacher asks them who will start, they decide on Cassie.

Cassie (reads): I just feel awful. I kind of feel like Carter and the rest of them are tomb robbers. Because I mean it is like they wouldn't (inaudible, some talk about the microphone interferes. Cassie resumes) To be disturbed by them I would feel awful. . .I kind of think Carter and the rest of them are tomb robbers themselves. But at least they have lots of gold; they sure are rich, especially Carter. I guess I am surprised that Carter did not get the mummy's curse.

Cassie: Next.

Marta: If I was in King Tut's position, I would not want to be disturbed in 3000 years and people are in my tomb chamber, that would be horrible.

Andy: My turn. I would open it. I am writing about one of the other things--whether or not you would

Cassie: Read.

Andy: All right.

Melissa: Sit up, Cassie.

Andy: (reads) "I would open it up because it is a great discovery. It would tell us a lot about life and about the past."

Cassie: Your turn, Juan.

Juan: I already know.

Melissa: Hurry up.

Juan: (reads) "If I were Carter I wouldn't be scared to open the tomb." Finished.

Melissa: (reads) "Dr. Carter was in a big mess. And it was a big challenge for him to say should he or should he not open the tomb."

Cassie: Now which was the best one?

Andy: I don't think she wants us to

Andy is interrupted by the teacher ending the small group discussions.

From a trait perspective, Andy might be viewed as deviating from the task because he was creative or a noncomformist. The teacher seemed to imply this view with respect to Andy:

> Andy decided to write his own thing (laughs) not pertaining to the question, I am sure that is what it is. He found something more interesting to write about. . . Andy can get a tad wordy (laughs) and at this point they (the other students) are frustrated and they want to read and get it over with. They don't want to hear one of Andy' philosophical lectures.

Her expectation is that Andy will both deviate from the usual course, but will also go on at length explaining why he wrote what he did. She views him as creative and verbose, but also sees that he is affected by his social context--the other students in the group who are not necessarily interested in his explanations.

A social constructivist view might see the task here as one that facilitates more equity (see Brandt, 1987). All students have written something. Because the teacher has previously indicated that all students in the group need a chance to read aloud, each student does have an opportunity to express his or her views. However, because the nature of the task (reading individual responses aloud, not reaching consensus about which was the best response) seemed to be unclear--some students interpreted the task as one in which they were supposed to vote, some dissension arose among the students. The roles that students assumed to accomplish the task were affected by the social context. Andy was responding to the nature of the task and the social context by attempting to explain both what he had written and what he interpreted as the task.

A view that considered the interactions from the point of view of gender, culture, and race would focus on the power relations expressed in the group. In a sense, Andy (the only white male in the group) was marginalized; he was not

allowed to provide his explanation, but was reminded to take his turn in round robin fashion. The girls seemed to be asserting some authority over the conversation by assigning turns, by telling students to hurry, and by resorting to outside authority when these tactics did not work. Juan, a Hispanic male, was initially perceived as a troublemaker who would not cooperate with the group. Although Juan seems to pick up on his low status in the group by saying, "I am going last because I don't know nothing," he actually may be resisting the girls' dominance. In the next interaction, however, with four of the same members of the group, the nature of the interactions are quite different.

Jeopardy game. Besides Andy, the group consisted of Juan, Cassie, and Marta (Melissa was absent that day). The group was having difficulty generating questions together, thus the group divided into two pairs: Marta and Cassie, and Juan and Andy who walked away to look up information. Noticing their departure, Marta said, "See they walk away like they are afraid." Cassie responded, "We are not afraid of them, they are wimpy." Marta agrees," They are wimpy, aren't they?" When they return, I attempt to get the group on task and ask if the students are contributing ideas. Juan answers, "Oh, only me and Andy are but they don't want to listen." Marta then responds, "We are asking questions and you say 'shut up.'" I suggest to the girls that they try again and Juan can write the questions. Cassie resists and says:

Cassie: *No, we already gave them ideas, no, they don't want to listen.*

Juan: *You don't understand. We had to put the answers first and then the question. She kept on telling us questions but she didn't know the answers for them.*

Marta: *I said 'who built the first pyramid?'*

Juan: *That is not an answer.*

Andy: *That is under pyramids.*

Cassie: *A question.*

Marta: *You keep saying everything is an answer, you don't even know.*

Juan: *Yes, I do.*

Cassie: *That was funny.*

Juan: *That is why I am working because they don't want to.*

The interaction escalated into an argument in which boys and girls attacked each other. Marta recognized that some member of the group needed to take the leadership, but they could not decide who, and attacked each other's intelligence and ability to be responsible:

Marta: *They don't even answer them.*

Juan: *Because you don't even know the answers to them, that's why.*

Marta: *I asked you for this, but you all didn't listen, why should I ask you now?*

Juan: *But you are supposed to say the answer now. Because I don't know it. It is her question.*

Cassie: *That makes her smarter than you.*

Marta: *Somebody has to be the teacher or something.*

Juan: *OK, it's me.*

Marta: *Not you.*

Juan: *Not you, you are not that responsible.*

The students sat together and Juan attempted to give an idea which is challenged by Marta as being an answer, then Marta attempted to give an idea which was challenged by Juan:

Juan: *Who was the pharaoh alive when Moses was alive?*

Marta: *It is an answer.*

Cassie makes noise.

Marta: *Who was the first pharaoh?*

Juan: *We already have that. We can't say that because it is a god.*

Marta: *It's a pharaoh and queen*

Juan: *I know but*

Andy: *The pharaoh is a god.*

Juan: *A pharaoh turns into a god.*

Cassie: *Shush, Andy.*

Cassie then calls boys names and leaves. Marta stays and makes another attempt at having an idea accepted:

Marta: *What did the pharaohs do when they were in Egypt?*

Andy: *That is not in our category, that is everyday life.*

Juan: *What did she say?*

Andy: *They asked what the pharaohs did.*

Juan: *Whose tomb was the last to be found? (pause) I think it was King Tut.*

Andy writes "Who was King Tutankamun?"

Marta's idea was criticized for not being in the correct category (another group is generating questions for "everyday life"). Juan's response was accepted by Andy since he wrote it on the paper and then began to talk about point values. Cassie returned to the group and suggested splitting up into boys and girls. She then grabbed the sheet with the question and answers from Andy who got irritated because he has not finished. The session ended shortly after this division into boys and girls.

A social constructivist perspective might suggest that there was no capable other to provide scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978). Because students were not clear about the task (some seemed to understand that the jeopardy game required them to give their responses in question form, while others did not), they could not be expected to interact very successfully. Students assumed tasks at which they could excel, e.g., Andy became recorder and assigned point values.

However, a poststructuralist feminist perspective would undoubtedly see school curriculum continuing to reproduce a patriarchal society within this small group interaction (Bennett & LeCompte, 1990). Although the group divided into two "equal pairs," the boys had the power in this group. The boys decided on what the questions should be and recorded them; the girls attempted repeatedly to provide ideas, but those were not recorded. The girls attempted to resist the domination by alternately shouting insults, making noises, or refusing to cooperate. Although he did not say much, Andy implicitly controlled the discourse by calmly explaining why the girls' answers were not acceptable, by recording the responses he found acceptable, and by assigning the point values. Andy's identity as a powerful male seemed to be the major construction in this interaction. He gained solidarity with Juan and took over the tasks of generating the questions and recording the answers. In this case, gender solidarity transgressed the boundaries of ethnicity and social class which might be more pronounced in other settings.

The teacher, however, seemed to interpret this interaction as a manifestation of aspects of the students' personalities. She said:

> I think Cassie did not take the assignment seriously, whatsoever. I think Marta fed off of Cassie. So Juan and Andy were trying to stay on task and do what they needed to do but they were not getting cooperation from Cassie and Marta and frankly Cassie can be extremely irritating. She does things to tick people off and she does silly things like that all the time, whereas the two boys were trying to keep on task.

Thinking that the girls may have felt excluded, I asked the teacher about this possibility. However, she believed the group did not interact successfully because Cassie was not taking the task seriously:

> Cassie started getting mean and silly. She started saying you are crazy and started to offend them. (Gives examples from tape). Maybe for a little while

she tried to help but she was being so silly at other times that they were frustrated so they did not want to take her seriously.

When asked to reflect on Andy' role, she interpreted Andy as sitting back, but quietly getting the task accomplished:

> This time it looks like Andy was sitting back. I think what Andy was probably doing was sitting back and doing it all himself and thinking of more questions. I think he was, I wasn't there to see it, but more on task than the rest. While the others were arguing he was probably thinking of questions and the way it should be worded. It seemed like something that was right up his alley because he was involved in the points and how many point should go to each question. I think Juan was on task until they all started arguing. Juan was doing the right thing but was not offering him any cooperation. Andy did not want to get involved really.

The teacher described the actions of the participants and seemed to make certain assumptions about students, especially Andy whom she presumed was "on task" whereas others were not. While the teacher had recognized that students had divided into same sex groups, she did not ascribe gender politics to their interactions. Instead, she seemed to analyze students as individuals and considered their "usual" behavior. However, using different theoretical perspectives it is possible to see the ways in which Andy assumed different roles depending upon the task and context. In the large group setting and in the jeopardy game, he had control of the discourse and seemed to be considered by his peers as a knowledgeable peer. However, when the teacher was not present, his peers valued, accepted, or resisted his efforts contingent upon the group composition and the task. In some settings, his subjectivity as a white male was more apparent than in others. Andy, like Rosa and Matthew appeared to reconstruct his subjectivity as he encountered different tasks and changing group compositions.

Discussion: Constructing Multiple Subjectivities

The three cases of students in various classroom arrangements on different tasks challenge the commonly held view that individuals are unified individuals with unchanging personality traits. Rather than displaying static personality traits, each of the three students responded quite differently in each of the settings. Their participation seemed to depend on the task in which they engaged and upon the gender, social class, and race of the other participants. For example, Rosa was described as "shy," yet in some settings she actively participated with her Hispanic female peers and, in other settings, she took on the role of assisting another student. While Matthew's ideas were valued in the large group settings by the teachers and peers, small group settings with close-ended tasks such as the "jeopardy game" appeared to limit his contributions. In comparison, Andy had control of the discourse in large group settings and his group's enactment of the jeopardy game; but in other small group settings his peers alternately valued, accepted, or resisted his efforts contingent upon the group composition and the task.

The cases suggest that students were continually in the process of constructing and reconstructing their subjectivities based on the demands of the particular social setting. Although teachers had described the students as having certain fixed characteristics such as shyness, the evidence suggests that students' subjectivities were more dynamic and constructed by a variety of factors such as ethnicity, race, culture, gender and social class. Students appeared to reconstruct their subjectivities--they altered their actions as they encountered different tasks and changing group compositions. In some of these settings, gender and race appeared to be more salient than in others. For example, Rosa' subjectivity as an Hispanic female seemed to play a larger role in the consensus task and the jeopardy game than it did in the open-ended response task. Matthew's subjectivity as a "disabled reader and writer" was more salient in the jeopardy game than in the large group setting of providing ideas for an afterlife. Andy's identity as a boy in the jeopardy game was more significant than when he read his responses aloud to a small group.

Each of the theoretical stances frames student interactions in different ways; each has its limitations. Trait theory fails to account for the differences in students' interactions within changing social contexts. The social constructivist position focuses on the changing task for facilitating participation or identifies lack of scaffolding for undermining participation, but this position does not consider students' relative positions as gendered, classed, and racial subjects. A more post structuralist view, which suggests that subjectivity is the product of social relations, more readily accounts for the differences in students' actions during literacy activities. The shifting power relations manifested in students' small group interactions suggests that race, social class, and gender are aspects of that multiplicity of subjectivities that are contingent upon the particular situation (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991; Walkerdine, 1990). The post structuralist view is more explanatory of students' differing responses because it not only considers race, social class and gender, but does not preclude the nature of the task as exerting influence in a particular social setting.

Implications

Because some students had more opportunities to participate in small group settings and others seemed to flourish in large group settings, one implication for practice is that students should have frequent opportunities to participate in both. Second, the nature of the task seemed to have an impact upon students' willingness and ability to participate; it follows that teachers need to think carefully about the kinds of tasks and the ways in which particular tasks might encourage some students to provide expertise at the expense of others. For example, the task of reaching consensus about a character's behavior in a story may not be appropriate as a response to literature task; because students' have various interpretations of text (Rosenblatt, 1978), coming to consensus may be difficult and unproductive. Likewise, generating questions for a jeopardy game might be unfamiliar, and therefore, too difficult for to students who do not watch game shows on television; the tasks is still oriented toward "right answers" and may preclude students who have divergent views. Third, race, social class, and gender clearly influenced students'

participation in small group settings. As Ladson-Billings (1994) and Cochran-Smith (1995) have suggested, teacher need to "see" race, social class, and gender, rather than denying them. Seeing these distinctions, instead of contributing to racism sexism, or classicism, can help teachers challenge their assumptions and provide a better education for all students.

The postmodern theoretical stance challenges trait theory and the "learning styles" philosophy which is derived from it. Seeing the subject as a "site for contradiction" and "in the process of construction. . . lies the possibility of transformation" (Belsey, 1980, p. 65). If teachers can see that students consist of many subjectivities in which they are continually reconstructing and being reconstructed by others within the social context, teachers may come to serve students of diverse backgrounds in more productive ways.

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